

The Historic
Lutheran Position
in
Non-Fundamentals

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The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines was brought to the attention of the Lutheran Church during 1938 through the reference to this distinction in the articles of union adopted by the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod. The term non-fundamental was there applied to certain views regarding Antichrist, the conversion of the Jews, the resurrection of the martyrs, and the thousand years of eschatology. Although agreement on these points was not established, the report adopted by both bodies declares that a difference in these matters need not be divisive of fellowship. Reference is made in the Missouri Synod's committee report to the tolerance which may be extended to those differing in these and similar doctrines. The question naturally arises whether, in taking this position, our Synod has entered upon a new method of disposing of doctrinal differences, that is to say, whether, in extending tolerance to certain non-fundamental points of doctrine, it has forsaken the historic Lutheran position. The following pages are submitted as a study of the traditional position of the Lutheran Church with reference to non-fundamentals. Some space is devoted also to the Scriptural background of the position taken by our dogmaticians.

Two words of caution are not out of place as we consider the facts here submitted. In the first place, by quoting certain positions held on certain points by our teachers from Luther to Walther, the writer expresses no opinion regarding the correctness of the views expressed. Secondly, the reader of these extracts will note a divergence on minor points among the dogmaticians. We could not be concerned with these unless we were to extend the length of this discussion unreasonably. We are concerned

with the general historic position on non-fundamental doctrines, open questions, problems of theology, etc. While an occasional side-light will naturally be cast on the articles of union adopted 1938, this paper is not submitted as an analysis of this document but is simply an historical study occasioned by the references contained therein to "non-fundamental" doctrines of the Church.

The Position of Martin Luther

The distinction between fundamentals and non-fundamentals in theology was not formulated by Martin Luther so far as I have been able to ascertain, but the distinction was observed by him through all periods of his literary activity. There is space here to touch upon a few characteristic expressions only. First as to exegesis.

One need not be a constant reader of Martin Luther to know that his writings abound in expressions which grant freedom in the field of exegesis: "I will permit each to decide this as he pleases"; "This point I leave to the grammarians"; "You may think as you please about this," and frequently, with something of a humorous twist, "This I leave to the learned heads." He was as far as a man could be from accepting any traditional interpretation and from setting up an "authoritative" exegesis of his own on any text. The following expressions are characteristic. On Luke 15:4: "To say whom the ninety-nine sheep in the desert are intended to represent we will leave to the great scholars and idle heads." (Erl. Ed., 13:30.) On Acts 15:29: "I will say that the Holy Ghost permitted James to stumble a little. A concession was made to the weakness of the Jews. Even so, while we call monasteries and nunneries a thing of the devil, we could pass these things by for a while out of charity if they desired it." (*Ibid.*, 19:193.) From his introduction to Link's *Notes on the Pentateuch*: "Even if the good, faithful teachers and Bible students did not always bring silver, gold, and gems but sometimes hay, stubbles, and wood, yet the ground is there; the rest will disappear in the Judgment, 1 Cor. 3:12." (*Ibid.*, 63:379.) On 1 Pet. 3:19: "This I don't understand, and no one has ever interpreted it. If it is held to mean that Christ after His death went down to the souls to

preach to them, I do not object. The interpretation is a possible one; but what Peter intended to say I don't know." (*Ibid.*, 52:153.)

It is difficult to draw the line sharply between exegesis and doctrine, as in the references, just quoted, to the Descent. However, there is an exceedingly large number of passages in the great Reformer's writings which definitely admit a certain leeway in the theological statement of certain truths of revelation. No account is here taken of Luther's differing expressions of transubstantiation and on purgatory, on the worship of saints and prayers for the dead. The conflicting views which can be quoted from Luther on these points simply indicate the progress which he made in his theological thinking. However, there are doctrines in which he consistently declared all decision as to details to be a matter of personal viewpoint so long as it does not contradict the clear texts. As regards, e. g., the descent into hell, he clearly distinguished between the fact that Christ descended into hell and the *nature or purpose* of this descent, which throughout his writings he declared indifferent.

He said in a sermon on the descent to hell, 1532: "It is sufficient to know that Christ personally destroyed hell and bound the devil. Beyond this article we may indulge our imagination as much as we please in order to help out our understanding." (*Ibid.*, 3:286.)

Sometimes Luther comes close to formulating a definition of non-fundamentals in the field of doctrine. An interesting passage is the following: "Here some are wondering whether it is God the Father whom they address when they say 'Our Father who art in heaven' or whether it is the divine essence. It is not surprising that in such strange and incomprehensible articles persons sometimes will go wrong. But where the foundation of the faith is firm, such straws and splinters will do no harm. The essential thing is that there are three persons in the Deity and each person is the same perfect God." (*Ibid.*, 37:53.) In connection with the Christian concept of heaven he said this: "There is a great difference between those things which are necessary to faith and which are not necessary. Cling to that which is clearly taught in Scrip-

ture. It clearly teaches that the saints live in heaven. Just how that may be we leave to God." (*Ibid.*, 15:438.)

Similar judgments are found scattered through his discussions of eschatological topics. Regarding the entire Book of Revelation: "Many have tried their hand at it; no one has produced anything certain. It is best to interpret it out of history and thus obtain a certain or at least an acceptable interpretation." (*Ibid.*, 63:160.) Regarding the Antichrist, every one knows of Luther's complete identification of the Papacy with the Antichrist foretold in the Scriptures. Yet his writings abound in passages which identify "the Pope with the Turk" as Antichrist, the "true Antichrist," and he explains this identification by pointing out that the Turk, like the Pope, rejects Christ as the Savior. Elsewhere Luther says: "The Turk is not such an Antichrist as the Pope," but Pope and Turk are linked in countless passages even as they are in his hymn "Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort." He puts the matter up to the comprehension of the individual: "That the Pope together with the Turk is Antichrist I for my part don't doubt any longer; believe what you please" — and this, note well, in the later editions of the church postil (Third Christmas Day) in which he had made emendations on other points.

Similarly Luther rejected as unscriptural the idea that the Jews would literally return to Palestine and restore the old system of sacrifices. This he could not accept because it would invalidate the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But as for a hope of a larger conversion of Israel in the latter days, Luther was unwilling to dogmatize. In all matters related to eschatology he advised against insistence upon any official interpretation of detail. He rejected all chiliasm definitely as contrary to the simple words of Scripture and in conflict with the entire New Testament view of the kingdom of God. But he did not make this a test of fellowship: The chiliasm of Wolfgang F. Capito was not even free from gross and carnal elements; yet in the Wittenberg Concord, which demanded on the part of Capito a specific retraction of an error regarding the means of grace, he demanded no retraction of mil-

lennialist teachings when he and his associates established fellowship with Capito, Bucer, and their adherents. There is no possibility of misunderstanding Luther on this point. He looked upon many of these particularist teachings as the wood, hay, and stubble which does not make a man a heretic if he stands on the ground which heretics in the true sense have discarded. With him there were two essentials. One was the doctrine of the manner in which grace has been secured for the sinner. The other was the doctrine regarding the means by which salvation is communicated to the believer.¹⁾ Regarding these essentials of Christianity Luther insisted that any error destroys the unity of the faith.

Luther's willingness to concede a difference (in the statement of doctrine) to an opponent who had given evidence of his willingness to bow to the Word of Scripture is evident in his dealings with the Waldensians in Bohemia and with the followers of Zwingli in Southern Germany.

At Marburg, 1529, Luther had refused fellowship to the Reformed theologians. Fourteen out of fifteen articles of doctrine had found them in agreement, but the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper was not conceded. Also after Marburg, Luther continued to assert in its most extreme form his conception of the actual eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ. Yet this did not prevent him from urging new conferences. He pleaded with the theologians to cease writing for a while. He welcomed every concession that was made to the truth, and in all his letters at this time and later there is not a trace of suspicion regarding the honesty of his opponents as they approached closer to the doctrine of Scripture. Writing to the Duke of Lüneburg, 1531, he objects to the

1) Elsewhere Luther mentions three essentials: that Jesus is God, that Jesus was man, that He merited salvation for us. It was regarding these "three parts" that Luther wrote: "If one small part is lacking, then all parts are lacking. For faith shall and must be complete in every particular. While it may indeed be weak and subject to afflictions, yet it must be entire and not false. Weakness [of faith] does not work the harm but false faith." (Cf. St. L. Ed., X, 993 ff.; Triglot, p. 14 f.)

unionistic formula offered by Bucer, but advises that controversy cease for the time being. "God has given grace that they admit Christ's body to be present in the Sacrament to the soul. I entertain the hope that by and by they will also yield this point, that Christ is present in the eating. There is nothing I should love more than to be at perfect unity with these people. I would die the most bitter death to achieve it." (*Ibid.*, 54:213.)

After much correspondence there came about the Colloquy at Wittenberg, and at its conclusion the famous Concord (*Concordie*) was adopted, and fraternal relations were established with the former Zwinglians of South Germany. It is to be noted that the Lutherans here acknowledged fellowship with Bucer and others who had once held the Reformed view of the Sacraments and who now accepted the Real Presence, also the reception of the body and blood on the part of the unworthy, though not by those devoid of Christian faith entirely; yet Luther exclaims in his letters of 1536 about the successful accomplishment of his efforts towards union. A joint service at which both parties partook of Holy Communion concluded the meeting. The difference which remained Luther regarded as unessential, nor did he waver later, since the Wittenberg Concord formed the basis of the Smalcald Articles. In the *Articles of Concord* this is said regarding Bucer and his adherents: "When Paul says that the unworthy do not receive the Sacrament, they believe that also the unworthy truly are offered and truly receive the body and blood of Christ." It says, "the unworthy"; it does not say, "the ungodly, the unbelievers." A study of such texts as Goesswein's *Eine Union in der Wahrheit* (St. Louis, 1886) is absolutely convincing as to Luther's clear comprehension of the difference which remained and his definite conviction that all differences *which concern the fellowship in the faith* had been removed.²⁾

2) "Luther held fast to the opinion that also the godless orally received the Lord's body if the Communion is celebrated in accordance with its words of institution. Yet he did not refuse the hand of brotherhood to the adherents of an interpretation which he could not regard as the full truth. Luther did not weaken in his position that the truth is an inviolable

It is the same attitude expressed in Luther's long dealings with the Bohemians. In one of his addresses to this communion occurs the sentence: "Though I am unable to adopt the mode of expression which is used by the Bohemians, yet I will not, on the other hand, rush them (*uebereilen*) nor compel them to use my way of speaking if only in the matter we become and remain in agreement, leaving the rest to God according to His will." This is from Luther's introduction to a confession of faith sent to Germany by the Bohemians about 1532. When their creed was revised in 1538, Luther noted with pleasure that they had dropped the rebaptism of baptized converts; and in 1542 he addressed one of their leaders thus: "I admonish you in the Lord that you remain with us to the end in communion of the spirit and doctrine as you have begun." (*Letters*, De Wette, 5:500.) But much earlier, when the doctrine of the Waldensians left indeed very much to be desired, in 1522, Luther in a letter to the Bohemian Diet, expressed the hope that Germans and Bohemians will be united in the faith; "until that happens, let each party bear with the other in patience." (*Erl. Ed.*, 53:145.)

The Dogmaticians

The first theologian who discussed in a systematic manner³⁾ the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles was Nicolaus Hunnius in his *Theological Examination of the Fundamental Difference between Calvinistic and Lutheran Theology*, Wittenberg, 1626. It was Hunnius who first defined a non-fundamental dogma as a dogma which must not necessarily be believed in order that true faith may be in the heart. Among such

whole, 'a gold ring, which is no longer a ring if even the smallest section is taken out.' But he distinguished between fundamental truths, which must be confessed by a genuine Christian body, on the one hand, and conceptions of the truth which in his opinion represented an erring interpretation but concerning which differing opinions might be tolerated and concerning which a final settlement was not necessary in order that there might be confessional unity." (Koestlin, *Martin Luther*, Vol. 2, p. 349 f.)

3) The distinction itself was first made by Gerhard.

concepts he lists many historical facts, such as details from the life of Christ and the authorship of Biblical books; but also denial of Antichrist revealed or the denial of the destruction of the world as to its substance. But sensing the abuse which might develop through a careless handling of this doctrine, he cautions the reader: "There are two kinds of doctrines. The one kind concerns faith in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, eternal salvation. The other kind does not produce this assurance but helps explain our doctrine or conveys other things necessary for Christianity. Whoever errs in the first kind of doctrine errs not only perilously, but his error affects faith. Whoever errs in the second type of doctrine errs perilously but in the moral field. One who denies the story of Samson or David certainly does not touch the foundation of faith; yet there is a moral offense, since such a one denies the truthfulness of God and thereby destroys the foundation of faith."

Nicolaus Hunnius wrote his *Discussion of the Fundamental Difference* at a time when efforts were made to bring about a unionistic amalgamation between the Lutheran and Reformed bodies. According to Hunnius the foundation of faith is threefold: 1. The essential foundation—the Triune God received in faith through the Mediator, Christ. 2. The organic foundation—the Word of God. 3. The dogmatic foundation—justification and salvation through faith in the merits of the God-man, Jesus Christ. He regarded as non-fundamental the doctrine of the fall of certain angels, of the immortality of man before the Fall, of Antichrist, of the unpardonable nature of the sin against the Holy Ghost, of ceremonies. He added, however, that a Christian may deny these doctrines and yet retain saving faith so long only as he cannot perceive their foundation in Scripture.

Among the later dogmaticians, Quenstedt and Huelsemann redefined with greater and greater detail the various types of articles, Huelsemann's division being followed by Calov and Meisner. There are wide differences as to detail. There was considerable uncertainty, *e. g.*, where to place the doctrine of original sin. Hunnius regarded the doctrine of the Lord's Supper as a non-fundamental

doctrine. When we consider the strict doctrinal position of Hunnius, his absolute rejection of the Reformed doctrine, it is clear that he did not regard the doctrine of the Lord's Supper an "open question." The entire distinction originally concerned not fellowship but the matter of salvation,— what must be believed in order that one may be saved?

Yet the old dogmaticians did not hesitate to state the practical bearings of this distinction. They consistently refused to make these secondary matters divisive. Not simply the problems of theology but even such weaknesses in the field of doctrine as Gerhard's incorrect view of the Sabbath and Dannhauer's notion of a particular resurrection, were not made a cause of pronouncing the judgment of heresy. Chemnitz has used the expression (quoted by Hoenecke, I, p.458) in this connection: "We honor these teachers as *orthodox* but reject their erroneous views."

The controversy regarding the omnipresence of the human nature of Christ did not disturb the essential unanimity of Lutheran dogmaticians in the doctrines concerning Christ's person. They upheld, one and all, that since the conception each nature is present with the other, that the God-man is present with His humanity everywhere in the universe where He wills to be present, and that He is present especially where He has promised His presence, as in the Church and particularly in the Eucharist. The point of difference between the Swabians (led by Brenz) and the Saxons (under Chemnitz) was the relation of the union of the natures to the states of Christ. Brenz taught not only the omnipresence of the flesh, but the complete exaltation of the God-man as beginning with the conception. From His birth Christ walked visibly on earth and also filled the entire universe. Accordingly the state of humiliation was not so much a withholding from the use of divine majesty as a withholding from public use. We do not here enter into all the detail of terminology. Briefly, in the theology of Brenz, humiliation and exaltation do not succeed one the other but are states which existed simultaneously. A supernatural mode of existence continuously accompanied the natural mode while Jesus was on earth.

The doctrine of Chemnitz regarding the same subject is set forth especially in his great work *Of the Two Natures*. He teaches an indwelling of divine majesty (from conception) in the humanity of Christ, a majesty which could be demonstrated *wherever it was the Lord's will to do so*. His omnipresence accordingly was not an absolute ("nude") one, independent of a special act of the will, but an omnipresence which depended upon such an exertion of Christ's will. By comparing the two doctrines, one might say that Brenz taught an essential communication of attributes while Chemnitz taught a dynamic or cooperative union.⁴⁾

It is interesting to note that also the theologians of the Formula of Concord were involved in this controversy, the Saxon Christology of Chemnitz being opposed by Andreae, who represented the Swabian type. The Formula of Concord (*Triglotta*, p. 1025 f.) teaches that Christ, according to His human nature,⁵⁾ may be present however, wherever, and whenever He wills, and this omnipresence is based on the hypostatic union. The Formula quotes Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper on this point. It renders no decision on the question of an absolute omnipresence (*nuda praesentia*). The controversy continued. Heshusius accepted the omnipresence (of the human nature) only in the Church and in the Lord's Supper. The debate was continued between Tuebingen and Giessen, the latter party teaching the possibility of the human nature's omnipresence and the former its actuality. The *Leipzig Decision* of 1624 essentially supported the Giessen theologians. While it does not reject the absolute presence, it refers to it with disapproval, and the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century on the whole abided by this settlement. They did not use the term *nuda adessentia* for the

4) Also the quotations from Chemnitz adduced by Dr. Pieper (*Christl. Dogmatik*, II, pp. 225—227), who stresses the "common basis" of Chemnitz and Brenz, do not fail to bring out his dynamic conception of the omnipresence of Christ's nature. G. Thomasius, *Dogmatik*, II, p. 308 ff., devotes sixty pages to the difference between Chemnitz and Brenz.

5) Only this, not the omnipresence of the Son of God, was in question.

omnipresence of the human nature of Christ but the phrase *dominium potentissimum et praesentissimum*. So Gerhard, and Quenstedt.

Now, with all this disagreement in the mode of presenting the ineffable implications of the union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ, none of these theologians, from Chemnitz down to Hollaz and Calov, questioned the orthodoxy of those who, within the framework of the Lutheran doctrine regarding the communication of attributes, differed in their teaching with reference to the exact meaning of the term "omnipresence of the human nature of Christ." The difference, it should be noted, was not at all in the field of ecclesiastical practise, nor did it involve simply a problem in exegesis. The issue revolved about a point in doctrinal theology; properly speaking, it concerned a problem in dogmatics raised through the effort (with which the Church had no quarrel then and should have none today) of rendering clear to the understanding all that is involved in a Scriptural doctrine, which *as an article of the faith* is indeed so clearly set forth in the New Testament that the Lutheran Church has never hesitated to make acceptance of it a condition of church-fellowship.⁶⁾

The position of all the leading dogmaticians of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries in the matter of these theological problems is unanimous. A general conversion of the Jews was expected by such distinguished Lutheran dogmaticians as Hunnius, Hafenreffer, Mentzer, Balduin, Meisner. (Hoenecke, Vol. IV, p. 281.) Yet none of these theologians were regarded as heretics by others who differed from them. It never entered their minds to make every point of theological definition, even in the sphere of Christian dogma, a matter with which church-fellowship would stand or fall.

Andrew Quenstedt, in his monumental dogmatics (Vol. II, p. 1687), distinguishes between "articles of the

6) Both the Swabian and the Saxon theologians condemned as error the doctrine of Calixt, who limited the omnipresence of Christ to the bodily presence in the Eucharist and denied the communication of attributes.

faith which are fundamental because they pertain to saving faith and articles which are not fundamental, knowledge of which is also derived from the Word of God but which pertain to dogmatical or historical faith. For instance, the doctrine that the Pope is the Antichrist is not such that ignorance of it in itself is a cause of damnation, there being many who undoubtedly were saved who knew nothing of it."

John Musaeus (1613—1681) emphasizes the truth that disagreement regarding adiaphorous things does not hinder the unity and peace of the Church. He writes in the *Treatise on Syncretism*: "There may be a true and godly peace among churches that have disagreement and controversy regarding ceremonies if only they agree otherwise in the teaching of the faith and of morals." Then he continues: "The same may be said about questions that develop as side-issues in the field of doctrine so long as they are of the nature that they can be affirmed or denied without affecting the Christian faith and life. In such a case doctrinal discussions of this kind are indifferent with reference to religion and salvation. Such questions commonly arise regarding the use of certain technical terms in theology, the interpretation of Scripture-texts, and other matters like these. Thus, for instance, the theologians who subscribed to the Augsburg Confession had differences of opinion regarding points in doctrine which in the judgment of some were to be regarded only as side-issues developing out of theological discussion, while others would rank such debated points among questions of faith. The former would then be willing to tolerate those in church-fellowship who departed from them, while the others would deny them fraternal recognition." Commenting on this opinion of Musaeus, another standard theologian of our Church, John William Baier (*Compendium*, III, 668), said: "If there is a difference of opinion only regarding adiaphora or about questions that have arisen by the way [as side-issues] in the discussion of doctrine, it is to be held that even while there is a disagreement, there may be true and godly peace. The only exception would be if one party or another would try to compel others to accept their viewpoint. In such

a case, of course, it is more necessary to insist upon Christian liberty of opinion than by an ill-timed peace to confirm the other party in his erroneous views."

Gerhard's position (*De Ecclesia*, 60:4) has been that of our Church: "Those who on account of a difference in some outward form or on account of a discrepancy in some dogma that does not concern the foundation of salvation disagree with one another are not thereafter to be regarded as schismatics if only they remain united in the bond of faith and charity." And Calovius speaks of "differences in minor points of doctrine while the unity of faith is retained and no article of faith is thereby subverted." Those who divide the Church for such reasons he terms schismatics, or originators of unchristian divisions. (Baier, III:636.)

The Scriptural Principles Involved in This Discussion

Whoever has received from the controversial rigor of the dogmaticians and from the *Damnamus secus docentes* of the Confessions an impression of formalistic intellectualism which rates all opposing doctrines alike and declares them all a call for denying the name Christian and brother, has not read our forefathers aright. For one thing, the orthodoxy of the fathers was not a loveless sitting in judgment on those of different opinion. Not a censorious criticism but brotherly love is the highest law also in controversy with erring disciples. Love is still the "bond of perfection," Col. 3:14. Our Confessions interpret this passage to mean "that there should be love in the Church in order that it may preserve concord, bear with the harsher manners of brethren as there is need, overlook certain less serious mistakes, lest the Church fly apart into various schisms and enmities and factions and heresies arise from the schism." (The Latin is striking: Love has the function to ignore "quaedam levia errata.")

In the second place, our theologians were well aware of the difference made in Scripture between doctrines of the first importance and doctrines that are compared to these as meat is compared to milk, Heb. 5:11-14; 6:1,2. Accordingly in the teaching of the Church there are fundamental things, here called "the foundation" (*theme-*

lion). While the grammatical structure of the passage is not quite clear (see the commentaries), the fundamentals being counted as four by some interpreters and as six by others, yet without question, the text refers to various stages of instruction or Christian knowledge, of which the first is essential if the second is to be attained.

Again, a distinction is to be made on the basis of 1 Cor. 3:11, 12 between doctrines which are the foundation of faith and other doctrines which are built up on this foundation. The doctrines which are essential in the sense that without a *knowledge* of them there is no Christianity were called primary articles by the dogmaticians; for instance the doctrine of the Trinity, Redemption, Justification. Here also such texts as 1 John 2:23 and Gal. 5:4 were cited. (The term heretic, as we shall see, is applied to those who deny one of these articles, and deny it contumaciously.)

The secondary articles are those fundamentals of the faith which cannot be *denied* without heterodoxy and of which a consistent denial will destroy the faith. As such doctrines the dogmaticians specify the articles of original sin, predestination, the means of grace, and others. The difference between these and the primary articles is indicated by the formula: *Articuli primarii non negari nec ignorari possunt; articuli secundarii ignorari, negari autem non possunt*. We are here not dealing with meaningless terminology. It is through this distinction that our dogmaticians were enabled to insist on the possibility that there are Christians in heterodox churches. At the same time a *conscious* denial of Scripture truth, they held, also in these articles, necessarily destroys the foundation of faith.

Non-fundamental articles are those not concerned with the essentials of faith. They were first called non-fundamental in the sense that even a *denial* of them (unless it can be demonstrated that such denial is based on an unwillingness to accept the teaching of Scripture) does not exclude from Christianity. Our teachers have classified under this head the doctrine concerning Antichrist, concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son, John's baptism, the millennium, the destruction or transformation of the world on the Last Day, the creation of

the world in six days, the rejection of the angels, and other dogmas. However, no two lists of non-fundamentals agree. Hunnius classifies the doctrine of the Sacraments with this group. Evidently, too, some of these "dogmas" are simply questions of interpretation, differences regarding a so-called *crux* of the exegetes, while others belong definitely into the sphere of doctrinal theology.

Heresy as Defined by the Lutheran Dogmaticians

The word heresy is derived from the Greek *hairesis*, originally from a verb which signifies to choose, to strive, to show an attitude or tendency, in classical Greek applied to the various philosophical schools. Thus the New Testament refers in a neutral sense to the various tendencies among the Jews, that of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), that of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5), even to the Christian movement (Acts 28:22). We observe the change from neutral to evil connotations in Acts 24:5 and 14. It here has the significance of a sect or schismatic party, synonymous with *schisma* and with *dichostasia*, as in 1 Cor. 11:19 and Gal. 5:20. In 2 Pet. 2:1 the same term is used in a definite reference to divisions caused by false doctrine, leading to a breach of fellowship. So also the derivative *hairetikos*, Titus 3:10.

The Scriptural concept heretic, in an evil sense, includes more than those who deny some fundamental element of Christian truth. Without using the word heresy, Paul speaks of those who "bring another Gospel," 1 Tim. 1:3, and from the words which follow it is clear that he was dealing with those who were disturbing the Church with speculations on some dark allusions in the Scriptures. In the same letter (6:4) he aims more directly at "heretics" who waste time in academic disputes and on non-essentials and through quarrels about words cause strife and enmity in the Church, giving evidence of malicious suspicions as to the honesty of those who differ from them. However, in predominant usage the idea and also the term heresy refers to a departure from the doctrine of Christ and His apostles.

In accordance with Scriptural usage the great dogmaticians of our Church did not use the word promiscuously

in their disputes about theological terms and definitions or about the interpretation of Bible-passages. Andrew Quenstedt, in his *Theologia Didactico-polemica*, quotes Balduin's definition of heretic thus (II, 1565): "A heretic is a person who holds a doctrine which subverts the foundation of faith, who persistently attacks some teaching which belongs to the fundamental articles of faith, who creates dissension and quarrels in the Church, and who in such opinion, although frequently admonished, contumaciously and maliciously perseveres." Reminding us of Luther's definition: "A heretic is one who does not believe those articles which are necessary and which we are commanded to believe." (Erl. Ed., 27:22.)⁷⁾

Theological Problems. As problems of theology the teachers have designated matters that are not only non-fundamental as to faith and fellowship but questions that are truly problematical because the authority of Scripture cannot be quoted for any certain definition. Accordingly among the "problems of theology" the theologians have

7) In the introduction to his *Christologie* (1851), Dr. J. A. Dorner discusses the relation of heresy to orthodoxy. He makes the point that we may properly speak of heresy only within the field of Christian theology. I translate: "The concept of heresy assumes acceptance of the fundamental Christian principle. It does not belong into paganism or Judaism, not even inasmuch as these reflect some of the influences of Christianity. Not everything that departs from Christianity in the religious field is to be termed heresy. A consistent pantheism or a deism based on materialism stand *below* the level of heresy, since they have no Christian background. Pelagianism, on the other hand, and even the later Manicheism, are properly called heresies since they still in some form view the work of Jesus Christ under a soteriological aspect. The same error may indeed be found within and without the Christian Church; it is properly called heresy only *when within*. It is to be noted, too, that heresy is always in the field of doctrine. It is a disease of Christian comprehension or understanding. Diseases of the spiritual life are in themselves not heresies, and there may even be a relative state of dogmatic health—although hardly for any length of time—when the spiritual life has decayed. . . . It should be noted, too, that one heresy will never prove the cure of another even though it represent the opposite extreme. Faith is the constituent element of the Church, and only from faith the power may be exerted for the refutation and elimination of error." (*Christologie*, I: 71 ff.)

mentioned such questions as: What sins did the angels commit who fell? Is the soul of each individual newly created, or is it derived from the soul of the parents? Did Mary remain virgin after giving birth to Jesus? It was Luther's belief that "the child's soul is not derived from the soul of the mother nor from her blood." (*Ibid.*, 46:331.) He declared that "Mary remained virgin after the birth of Christ." (*Ibid.*, 45:17.) Problems may be occasioned by a *crux* of exegesis or may be some abstruse point in doctrinal theology or a difficult case in casuistry. In such matters the Lutheran Church has always accorded perfect freedom of expression so long as no contradiction developed with the Word of God.

The Position of Dr. Walther

In his edition of the dogmatic handbook of J. W. Baier, prepared for class use in Concordia Seminary, Dr. C. F. W. Walther corrects certain erroneous views of Baier regarding the Sabbath and civil government. Yet he refers to Baier as an orthodox (*rechtgläubiger*) teacher. In the same text-book we also notice that the quotations from other dogmaticians which Dr. Walther supplied in his footnotes are given in the *thetical* material, with no hint that certain divergent opinions expressed might affect the standing of these theologians in the orthodox Church.

Dr. Walther's attitude regarding slavery is well known. Yet in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p. 225 ff., he published an article attacking slavery and appended to it the following *Fussnote der Redaktion*: "Sowenig wir uns befugt gehalten haben, gegenwaertigen Artikel um des Dissensus willen zurueckzuweisen, in welchem unsere, wir achten, wohlbegruendete Ueberzeugung mit Inhalt desselben steht, so koennen wir doch nicht umhin, unserm Dissensus hiermit einen Ausdruck zu geben." Evidently he did not regard a difference of opinion with reference to the Scriptural view of slavery as divisive of fellowship. But Dr. Walther has not left us in the dark concerning his view on non-fundamentals. He has discussed the subject at great length and in a manner which leaves nothing to be desired in point of clearness.

Writing as editor of *Lehre und Wehre*, Dr. Walther contributed to the 14th volume (1868) a discussion of open questions. He defines these as questions which may be decided one way or another without affecting a teacher's standing in the orthodox Church; questions that may be answered affirmatively or negatively without destroying ecclesiastical, fraternal relations. The existence of such questions is argued from the prohibition not to add anything to the Word of God, Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18. The conclusion is drawn that whatever is not contained and decided in the Word of God may not be coordinated with Scripture and thus added to the divine Word. To call such matters as are not contained in the Bible divisive of fellowship would be unscriptural.

The article then classifies as open questions, first of all, the theological problems. It applies this term to matters which force themselves upon our attention when we discuss articles of the faith but which do not have a solution in Scripture. He quotes Rechenberg: "Theological problems are matters that do not concern the economy of faith, such as have been discussed time and again in the schools and denial of which does not entail the charge of heresy." Dr. Walther mentions as examples of theological problems the question whether Mary had other children; the origin of the human soul; the destruction of the world as to substance or as to attributes; the day of creation on which the angels were made. Then he adds: "Such and other problems some of our orthodox dogmaticians (for instance, Baier, Hollaz) place among the non-fundamental articles of the faith. From this they did not, however, conclude that all such articles are 'problems.'" In a footnote: "This terminology easily leads to confusion. Reusch, e. g., misunderstood Baier to mean that non-fundamental articles have no clear ground in Scripture, whereas Baier clearly indicates that such articles are non-fundamental only because those ignorant of them may yet be Christians. Balduin and others define 'problems' as questions that are not clearly answered in Scripture. Luther and Chemnitz as well as all the orthodox teachers of their time list among the theological problems, e. g., the authority of the antilegomena of the New Testament."

In a second article Dr. Walther says that open questions are, in another sense, all matters of a problematic nature. He lists the following: historical and chronological questions; cases in casuistry; the explanation of difficult Scripture-passages; the technical terms used in theology to define a point in dogma; the form of church government; in brief, anything that pertains to the mode of presentation in the field of doctrine. "Even among orthodox teachers," he continues, quoting Musaeus, "there will be differences of opinion in the presentation, the explication, and the defense of theological doctrine. When this happens, no one shall begin to protest and condemn and threaten to sever the bond of fellowship."

Dr. Walther next quotes the following from Musaeus, a statement worth translating in full: "In questions which are related to the deeper understanding of the Christian religion and of the articles of the faith we may well differ as did our sainted fathers and the Saxon theologians,⁸⁾ and such disagreement they never regarded as a cause of controversy, ever granting to the other the right of his opinion and remaining just the same in unity and harmony. For example, it was argued whether original sin is essentially positive or negative, Dr. Meisner of Wittenberg defending the former and Gerhard the latter definition. Yet the bond of unity and peace was maintained between them for all that."

Dr. Walther also quotes Luther, who even regarded it as an open question whether one would accept his formula that the body of Christ is "in, with, and under" the bread if only he believed in the Real Presence.

On the other hand, Dr. Walther (p. 66) declares with all possible emphasis: "We cannot treat as an open question either what is clearly taught in the Word of God or what contradicts a clear Word of God, no matter how far from the center of the saving doctrine such teaching may be." But he continues: "This does not mean, however, that we are at once to declare fraternal relations severed with any member of the Church who is teaching falsely, even though he hold an error clearly contradicting

8) Musaeus is writing an opinion of the faculty of Jena.

the Word of God. It is hardly possible to imagine a more abominable fanaticism and one more calculated to destroy the unity of the Church. No higher degree of unity in doctrine except in fundamentals has ever been attained by the Church, and only a fanatical chiliast could hope for a greater degree of unity.⁹⁾

"Furthermore, we are not going to assert that a Church which fosters an error in contradiction to Scripture but not affecting the foundation of faith must be denied fellowship by an orthodox Christian. To deny that the entire visible Church may err would be papistical. So long as a Church does not persist in its error, such error, even serious error, is not a separating gulf, least of all when such a Church is already headed towards union in complete acceptance of the truth."

"Finally," Dr. Walther says, "our attitude towards open questions does not deny that the degree of comprehension should be kept in view when we are about to pass judgment." He quotes Kromayer: "There are *degrees* of evidential force in deductions made from the Word of God. While these degrees do not affect the authority of Scripture, they help excuse the weakness of some Christians who are not able to see the force of such conclusions and who must be tolerated by those who have the better understanding."

The distinction that is to be made between those who err *doctrinally* through weakness of understanding and those who tenaciously cling to their error, yet claim the privileges of fellowship, is next brought out as follows: "Are we, then, to excommunicate every one as a heretic who should err in some non-fundamental point? Must we at once sever fellowship with a Church that is contaminated with an error of this nature? As already stated, this is not our opinion. What we claim is this:

9) Liesse sich doch kaum ein grauenhafterer, gerade die damit beabsichtigte Einigkeit der Kirche zerstörenderer Fanatismus denken. Hat doch die Kirche nie eine höhere Stufe der Einigkeit in der Lehre erreicht als die einer fundamentalen, und nur ein schwärmerischer Chiliast könnte hoffen, dass die Kirche je eine höhere Stufe erreichen werde.

While not to be treated as a heresy, an error in non-fundamentals, if it contradicts a clear word of God, is to be demonstrated as invalid, to be fought and opposed with all patience and instruction. If all means have been exhausted, so that it is clear that it is not a case of weak understanding or lack of comprehension; when also in the non-fundamental error it develops that the erring one consciously and persistently contradicts the Word of God and thereby wrecks the original basis of our faith, — such a one is living in mortal sin and is not to be tolerated as a brother in the faith. This applies to church denominations. An absolute unity of faith and teaching is not possible in this life, only a fundamental one. But this does not prevent us from attacking doctrines in non-fundamentals which are against the clear Word of God. Such a Church cannot be regarded as a true Church if it professes officially such errors in non-fundamentals and stubbornly persists in the same in spite of instruction and thereby weakens the organic basis, or also if a Church persists in calling religiously indifferent some departure from the clear Word of God."

A writer in an Iowa Synod paper had reproached Walther with inconsistency because he rejected the idea of open questions, yet refused to separate himself from those who took interest on their money. Walther replied (*Der Lutheraner*, May 1, 1871): "Let it be understood that we very well know how to distinguish between articles of the faith and such Scripture-teachings as are not articles of the faith. A clear teaching of the Bible, whether it appears small or trifling, is never an 'open question.' But, on the one hand, we are willing to fight to the uttermost for every article of the faith since our faith and our hope depend on each of them; and we deny fellowship to those who stubbornly contradict. On the other hand, we by no means regard it as necessary, in every case, to force the fighting to an extreme for other Scripture-teachings that are not articles of the faith. Much less shall we pronounce sentence of damnation upon the opposing error (although we reject it) or sever fellowship with those who err only in such matters. When a controversy concerns such doctrines as do not belong to the articles of the faith, we

are only interested in one thing: whether the opponents evidently contradict because they do not wish to subject themselves to the Scriptures; that is, whether they — in spite of their agreement with the fundamentals of Scripture — reject the foundation on which all these doctrines rest, namely, the Word of God."

During the colloquy between representatives of the Missouri Synod and the Buffalo Synod (Buffalo, 1866) the definition of the Church was an important issue. The representatives of Buffalo declared that in their opinion the pure preaching of the Gospel and the integrity of the Sacraments pertained to the essence of the Church and were not only marks, "since without Word and Sacrament there can be no Church; Word and Sacrament according to their power and obligation belong essentially into the concept 'one holy Christian Church.'" Dr. Walther admitted that he "had no hope of coming to an agreement on this point"; yet he declared that he "did not regard this difference as divisive of church-fellowship."

Regarding the physical resurrection of the martyrs, Selnecker taught that "Christ raises up every year some of His own throughout the time of the New Testament." *Lehre und Wehre* (1872, p. 75) says regarding this opinion of Selnecker's (who was one of the authors of the Formula of Concord) that it was a "queer notion" (*sonderbare Meinung*), but defends him against the charge of heterodoxy since his assumption of continuous resurrections of martyrs is merely an exception to the rule (the universal resurrection on Judgment Day) clearly taught by Selnecker elsewhere. On the following page Dannhauer's belief in a special resurrection of the martyrs as occurring on Judgment Day is cited, and the writer defends him against any charge of chiliasm on this score.

The strange doctrine of the intercession of the saints for the Church Militant was discussed in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868 (p. 245 ff.). In the course of this article the author said: "This idea of an intercession of the saints we classify with what our theologians call 'strange notions,' as, for instance, the expectancy of a great conversion of Jews (a doctrine which has even greater similitude of Scrip-

turalness than the one here in question). It will harm no one who does not draw inferences from it. Any one who teaches correctly regarding the office of Christ and the means of grace may continue to engage in such dreaming, as did Chemnitz and Carpzov, he will yet remain a Christian and a Lutheran for all that."

In the seventies of the past century a restudy of the doctrine of church union was occasioned by the separation of certain orthodox ministers from the State Church of Prussia. The leader in this movement, Pastor Brunn, formulated a statement which was published as a leading article in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1873, p. 289 ff. Pastor Brunn insisted that true fraternal relations can exist only "on the basis of the pure doctrine and true unity of faith." In the course of the discussion he refers to non-fundamental articles in the following terms:

"Although we are convinced that adherence to the Symbols includes also the non-fundamental doctrines, for instance, Antichrist, yet we agree with the opinion of our fathers that a difference of opinion in non-fundamental doctrines does not constitute heresy, does not absolutely exclude from the teaching office, and does not prevent true spiritual union, if only there is no conscious sinning against the Word of God and if the peace of the Church is not disturbed by such opinions.

"Differences in the field of morality such as have developed recently among Lutherans—regarding usury, prohibited degrees, etc.—we do not regard as an obstacle of fraternal communion if only faith and love are supreme and if such questions are not abused with the giving of public offense." ¹⁰⁾

Walther's views regarding the relation of non-fundamentals to Christian fellowship never changed. As late as 1886 he endorsed the stand which Luther had taken in the *Concordie*: "The *Concordie* is positive proof for the readi-

10) Brunn rejects however as "fundamental error" in the same article the teachings of *the new theology*—(which denied verbal inspiration and rationalized the incarnation, election, and the doctrine of the Sacraments)—when *this theology* misinterpreted Scripture texts in terms of modern Chiliasm. P. 294.

ness of Luther not only to fight to the death rather than permit the Word of God to be adulterated even in some apparently most insignificant point, but also to give the hand of fellowship to all who desire to retract their errors and give honor to the truth." (*Der Lutheraner*, 1886, p. 37.)

Some Conclusions

A

Regarding articles fundamental and non-fundamental we note that our Church has ever refused to draw any of the following conclusions:

1. That this distinction establishes a difference between things in the Scriptures that are to be believed and others that need not be believed.

2. That orthodoxy is concerned only with the fundamental articles.

3. That departure from the Scriptural doctrine in non-fundamental points is to be condoned.

4. That a theologian may be permitted to substitute his own view for a non-fundamental article recognized by him as the teaching of Scripture.

B

Concerning the distinction of fundamental articles (primary and secondary), non-fundamental doctrines, open questions, and theological problems, the following should be kept clearly in mind:

1. The designation of certain articles as *fundamental* is a Scriptural one and is of great importance in the discussion of church-fellowship. Furthermore, the term heresy, heretic, in theological language has one historic sense, and one only, the error of one who rejects a fundamental doctrine of Scripture and adheres to it in such a way as to force the issue upon the consciousness of the church.

2. There is no agreement in the Church as to the exact distinction between non-fundamental articles and open questions, on the one hand, nor between open questions and problems of theology, on the other. Since none of these terms are defined as to their subject-matter in Scrip-

ture, any disagreement concerning the *exact classification* of anything outside the fundamental teachings of Scripture is not divisive, however desirable exact classification may be.¹¹⁾

3. Since the term "*open question*" has been used both with reference to non-fundamental doctrines clearly taught in Scripture and also with reference to problems of theology, it is best to discard the term entirely and banish it from theological discussion.

4. The term "non-fundamental" is the genus and "problems of theology" is the species. In other words, every so-called problem, whether in the field of dogmatics or in exegesis or in ecclesiastical practise (casuistry), is a non-fundamental issue in theology; but not every non-fundamental teaching is a mere problem.

5. With reference to church-fellowship, *non-fundamentals may be divisive* when these concern a doctrine or historical statement clearly set forth but consistently ignored or denied in the public doctrine of a religious body; while problems of theology are not divisive of fellowship at any time.¹²⁾

11) Pieper distinguishes among the fundamental doctrines those of a primary and those of a secondary type. Among the latter he mentions the doctrine of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He stresses the "happy inconsistency" which led theologians to refrain from drawing the natural conclusions from their errors. He warns against abusing the doctrine of non-fundamentals in the interest of indifferentism. Among the non-fundamentals Pieper mentions the doctrine of the Antichrist and the angels. As theological problems Dr. Pieper designates only such doctrinal questions as are not answered or not clearly answered in Scripture and concerning which the theologian must learn to keep silence. It is clear that this leaves out of account a very large group of theological propositions which are derived from a close study of Scripture and from the attempt, certainly not reprehensible, to clarify and define the implications which suggest themselves to the mind of the theologian. It also omits the *cruces interpretum* and the *casus conscientiae*.

12) Probably the controversy about the individual cup illustrates best the nature of a theological problem. The use of individual cups instead of the common chalice involves a problem in liturgics, a ceremony of the church, and a point of Scripture interpretation. It is not an idle question raised for

6. Any severance of fellowship which has no better ground than the simple fact that a non-fundamental of Christianity has come into controversy¹³⁾ and any severance of relations based on a disagreement regarding some theological problem is properly *schismatic* and is un-Christian *separatism*.

7. Insistence on agreement in the solution of theological problems is insistence *in adiaphoris*. As between a separatism which demands more as a condition of union and fellowship than the Word of God demands, and a syncretism which demands less as a condition of fraternal relations than the Word of God demands, there is no choice.

C

The historic Lutheran position in the question of non-fundamental doctrines has been surveyed. Several questions arise which need to be answered even in as brief a treatise as this. The questions I have in mind are these:

1. Admitting that Luther and the dogmaticians of our Church, in the attitude described, have not violated a principle of Scripture, is it not a dangerous thing to distinguish between fundamentals and non-fundamentals or with Walther between "doctrines of the faith" and "other Scriptural teachings"? Does not this open the way for Liberalism and unionism?

Our answer to this would be that the record of Luther and of the orthodox teachers of our Church speaks for itself. They have printed upon our Church the character of strict confessionalism. Theirs has been a confessionalism which has endured for four centuries. For all of Luther's willingness to accept the Pope and his bishops as spiritual

the purpose of argument or due to an inquisitiveness which seeks to penetrate into the arcana of divine revelation but is a problem in the sense indicated above. To admit, as we do, diversity of practise in this matter is not a concession to a misunderstanding of the New Testament in some non-essential point but is a difference in an adiaphoron, more definitely stated, in a problematic matter not involving the doctrine at all.

13) But not held contumaciously, as in the case stated above, under 1.

heads of the Church (if they adhered to the Scriptures), he yet remained their antagonist to the end, and his spirit lives in Protestantism today. After the Wittenberg *Concord* came the Smalcald Articles — no weakening of conviction there, no concessions. The dogmaticians disagreed on the definition of the omnipresence of Christ's human nature without declaring the bond of fellowship broken; but when Calixtus advanced propositions which limited the omnipresence to the Sacrament and which denied the communion of attributes, they to a man disavowed him as a heretic. As for Dr. Walther, no one who has read his theological essays will say that he ever made his position on non-fundamental doctrines a reason for weakening the Scriptural principle on any point.

2. But have not theologians been duped into a semblance of unity by permitting the opponent to retain his view on some non-fundamental point?

I reply: Tolerating, with reservations, a difference in non-fundamentals is not the same as saying that both true and false may be accepted in a unionistic peace. As for assuming duplicity in the opponent, the great defenders of orthodoxy from Athanasius down have met their opponents in a spirit of charity, fully trusting in the sincerity of their declarations. They have never adduced some former expression of the opponent in order to prove his insincerity in more recent declarations. They have observed the Eighth Commandment. They have been at least as decent as one expects business men and politicians to be in their dealings with each other. Luther had much reason to distrust the statements of German Zwinglians, yet met with absolute trust their representatives at the Wittenberg Colloquy. Let him be an example to American Lutherans.

3. Is it not dangerous to make concessions in non-fundamental teachings since this may cause those holding the variant opinion to become set in it instead of acquiring a better understanding?

In answer to this I will ask — Why have we stressed merely the "happy inconsistency" of those who were involved in some error? Why have we not trusted more

in the power of *the truth confessed by them* to overcome by a happy consistency the remnants of false teaching in their system? Moreover, the point here touched upon is positively theoretical. Or *what instance* can be adduced from church history when such tolerance accorded an otherwise orthodox teacher resulted in confessional decay and apostasy?

4. But is not for a conservative body like the Missouri Synod any concession in non-fundamentals a perilous procedure, which will lead to unionism?

Again, the caution is based on theoretical considerations only. The simple fact is that we have had unionistic tendencies and incipient Liberalism only as a reaction to strictness in adiaphoris. These tendencies have been overcome through the affirmations of an evangelical spirit.

5. But is it not dangerous to spread abroad our readiness to accept those of orthodox faith who differ from us in some point of exegesis, teaching, or practise? May this not be employed as an excuse by a liberal element to break down our strict confessionalism?

This danger can by no means be denied. But it is not a danger of our making. It is of a piece with the abuse of liberty against which the Church must always be on her guard. For instance, we assert that there are children of God in all church-bodies. Will not this suggest to the weak and indifferent that they may be saved in whatever church they may join? We assert that a Christian may drink intoxicating liquor without sinning. May this not be, has it not been, abused by intemperance? And what transgression of the Third Commandment because we teach our people the abrogation of the Sabbath ordinances! What lack of charity and good works and stewardship because people hear that salvation is by grace alone, without works of merit! In other words, this objection proves too much and hence proves nothing.

6. But how shall we control our own clergy in their reading and writing if license is given to differ in non-fundamentals?

No such license is given in any statement of our dogmaticians. What they and what we assert is only this,

that at a certain distance from the very Word of Scripture, theological opinions may arise on minor questions which *need* not be divisive of church-fellowship.

7. But where will be our synodical discipline if these distinctions are not fully understood?

To this let me say that we do not depend upon discipline for our preservation in the truth. Discipline, supervision, censorship, are external means and easily become a species of tyranny or at least of compulsion so that the fear of the loss of position is what will keep more liberal spirits in line. This is thoroughly unevangelical and un-Lutheran. We intend to trust in the power of the truth and the love which it creates in its adherents rather than in discipline. We shall not forget the inherent power of the truth and of the Christian's love of the truth.

